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THE RIGHT BOOK FOR THE RIGHT CHILD —at the Right Time

Anita Silvey

Very early in my forty-year career in children's books, I started asking anyone I met (at cocktail parties, dinners, even in cabs and elevators) about the books they had read as children and what they remembered about them. A universal icebreaker, this question would elicit smiles and fond memories. Almost always, the person I spoke to would recall both the name of an individual—the parent, teacher, or librarian—who had provided the book, and how the respondent felt about reading the book and about having the book recommended especially for him or her. "I wasn't a good reader, but my school librarian thought I could tackle a challenging book. Her faith in me made all the difference," a participant at Camp Read-a-Lot in Saint Paul, Minnesota recently said to me. I have heard this kind of statement thousands of times over the years.

For *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children's Book*, I talked to people whom I would not ordinarily meet—about 110 leaders of society in a variety of fields. I sought either an essay or an interview from well-known practitioners in the fields of science, arts, politics, and sports. To these willing participants I posed a more serious question than the one I usually asked: "What children's book changed the way you view the world? When you hear the title of this project, what book comes to mind?"

Any volume I create changes the way I look at the world, and this project made me reexamine many of my long-held assumptions. Halfway through it, I decided that I had possessed far too little faith in the importance of children's books—even though I have spent a lifetime dedicated to that idea. As I listened to Kirk Douglas, Edward Villella, Peter Lynch, Steve Forbes,

Andrew Wyeth, Julianne Moore, and Pete Seeger speak with passion about a children's book—and the person who had introduced it to him or her—I understood, probably for the first time, the profound role that children's books play. Not only do those who dedicate their lives to books remember the ones they found in childhood, but those who make the world a better place have also been changed by their childhood reading.

I was truly surprised by how many people selected careers because of a children's book. Robert Ballard raised the *Titanic* from the ocean, but he began his search in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. "I am a modern day Captain Nemo," he stated. Andrew Wyeth wanted to become a painter when his father N.C. Wyeth read *Treasure Island*, showing his son the stunning images like "Blind Pew." Robert Kennedy Jr. acquired a falcon

after devouring Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*; he believes that generations of environmentalists have been inspired by this powerful book.

Others found a philosophy or way to view life in a beloved volume. The dancer Edward Villella, Clinton cabinet member Donna Shalala, and sportscaster Tiki Barber all embraced the positive message of *The Little Engine that Could*. But in Donna Shalala's case, she focused on the fact that the triumphant little engine was female! After a librarian in Nyack, New York put *Wolf in the Woods* into the hands of young Pete Seeger, he became a devotee of Ernest Thompson Seton; folk-singer Seeger has been working for several decades to clean up the Hudson River, but his love of the land grew in childhood under Seton's tutelage.

I have always maintained that children read for character and for story; in fact, many people recalled characters from children's books. Jo March of *Little Women* inspired actress Julianne Moore, television commentator Judy Woodruff, and writer Bobbie Ann Mason. Anita Diamant didn't want Mary Poppins for a nanny. She wanted to *become* Mary Poppins. Les Moonves, CEO of CBS, still finds himself attracted to the adventurous Babar the Elephant.

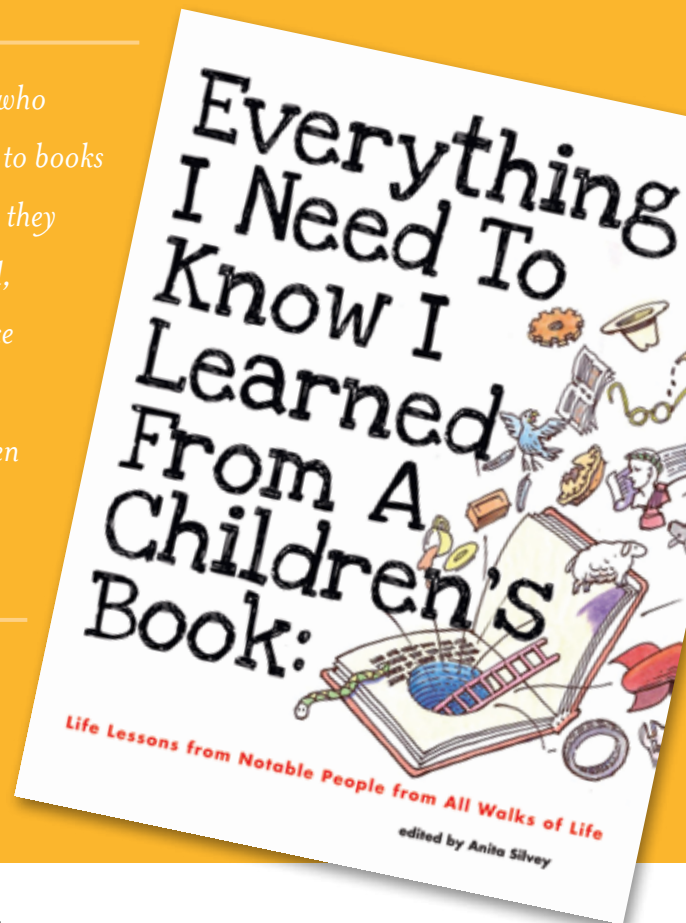
However, I did not expect people to carry with them a single line from a children's book for years, and yet many did. William DeVries, the cardiothoracic surgeon who implanted the first artificial heart, has recited a sentence from *The Wizard of Oz* throughout his professional career: "I would bear all the unhappiness without a murmur, if you will give me a heart."

I have been a strong advocate for books of artistic and literary merit because I believe that they naturally

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make the most profound impact on children. Many of the participants chose such a book. But other types of books surfaced as well, such as the Stratemeyer Syndicate books—Tom Swift, Hardy Boys, and Nancy Drew. Leslie Stahl, a CBS *60 Minutes* commentator, selected the privately printed *Pink Ice Cream*, one that has never made anyone's list of recommended titles. These selections demonstrate that any title can have a lasting impact if it speaks to a particular child. As adults, we are searching for the right book for the right child—at the right time.

Just as I thought they would, these leaders recalled who gave them the book. They talked about what the light was like in the room on the day a teacher read *Charlotte's Web*. They link a book and the caring individual who shared it with them. As I say in the introduction of my book, "When we give children books, we become part of their future, part of their most cherished memories, and part of their entire life."



I only hope in the busy and hectic minutes that we face this year, we can all remember, for a moment, that we are shaping our future leaders. Even more important—by giving the right book to the right child—we become part of memories cherished and carried long into the future.

Anita Silvey was Publisher of children's books at Houghton Mifflin and Editor of *The Horn Book Magazine*. She has appeared frequently on National Public Radio, "Today," "60 Minutes" and elsewhere to recommend books for children and is the author of *Children's Books and Their Creators*; *100 Best Books for Children*; *500 Great Works for Teens*, and a number of other works. Awards she has received include The Women's National Book Association Award and the Ludington Award from the Educational Paperback Association. She currently teaches course in children's literature at Simmons College in Boston and St. Michael's College in Burlington, Vermont.